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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DHAKA 000205

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [EAID](#) [KDEM](#) [PHUM](#) [PINS](#) [BG](#)

SUBJECT: BANGLADESH: SHEIKH HASINA'S INNER CIRCLE: LOYAL TO THE CORE

REF: A. DHAKA 196

- [1](#)B. 08 DHAKA 1304
- [1](#)C. 08 DHAKA 1121
- [1](#)D. 08 DHAKA 1059
- [1](#)E. 08 DHAKA 382
- [1](#)F. 08 DHAKA 1218
- [1](#)G. 08 DHAKA 622
- [1](#)H. 07 DHAKA 410

Classified By: Ambassador James F. Moriarty. Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina relies on a small circle of trusted relatives, family friends, and time-tested devoted advisers while sidelining individuals she perceives as disloyal. Hasina's sister and son who reside abroad, are among her closest confidantes. Hasina also relies on longtime faithful party members, including Agriculture Minister Matia Chowdhury and President Zillur Rahman to offer counsel and support. Hasina's election promises to usher in political change, as well as her desire to groom a new generation of party leaders, probably prompted her nomination of Foreign Minister Dipu Moni and State Minister for Home Affairs Sohel Taj, both up-and-comers. Ultimately, however, Hasina trusts close family relations to carry out her most sensitive agendas.

FAMILY TIES ARE KEY

[1](#)2. (C) Hasina trusts and depends on her younger sister Sheikh Rehana, who lives in London, and her son, Sajeeb "Joy" Wazed, who lives in Washington, DC, as trusted confidantes. Hasina probably relies more on Rehana for advice relating to Bangladesh's political climate because her son's time in the US has made him "too American to understand Bangladesh," according to a senior Awami League official. Hasina has sought and heeded Rehana's counsel on political nominees in the past. Both Rehana and Joy work to advance Hasina's political goals. During Hasina's incarceration under the Caretaker Government, they were the only intermediaries she trusted to represent her views to the Caretaker Government. Rehana has participated in high-level party meetings and traveled to Bangladesh to help Hasina campaign. Joy, who has not given up on a political career of his own, is working in the private sector to advance one of the Awami League's campaign initiatives, "digital Bangladesh."

[1](#)3. (C) Hasina depends on Retired Major General Tariq Ahmed Siddique for his military expertise and trusts him based on his loyalty and his relationship with her family. Siddique,

whose brother is married to Rehana, has a long history as part of Hasina,s family, including acting at times as a surrogate father for Sajeeb, which is partially what inspires Hasina,s trust. Siddique is a cabinet-level Adviser who influences military and security issues. Siddique served as Hasina,s former security chief and she recently charged him with researching establishing a National Security Council.

LOYAL ADVISERS

14. (C) Hasina considers Syed Ashraful "Ashraf" Islam a loyal Awami League member. She has entrusted him with the Local Government Ministry portfolio, partially to reward him for holding the fractured Awami League together as acting General Secretary while she was imprisoned during the Caretaker Government. Ashraf also was a key interlocutor with the military Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI), which played an active role in negotiating Bangladesh's return to democracy during the Caretaker Government. Ashraf's father was one of four leaders killed in the "jail killings" at Dhaka Central Jail in November 1975. He spent many years in the UK, where he also developed a close relationship with Sheikh Rehana. Ashraf was one of the few top Awami League leaders to be chosen for Hasina's cabinet and frequently attends high-level meetings with her. Ashraf is a long-serving Awami League member who served as party spokesman and was involved in student politics. The Local Government Ministry is a key portfolio responsible for more than 25 percent of the national budget.

DHAKA 00000205 002 OF 003

15. (C) Hasina selected Matia Chowdhury to be Agriculture Minister because of her reputation for being loyal and uncorrupt as well as for her strong track record of government service. She had experience in Bangladesh,s agricultural sector, having served as Minister of Agriculture and Food and Agriculture Secretary for past Awami League governments. She is the only Presidium member to be chosen for a cabinet level post, reflecting her status as a trusted adviser. As a woman in a Muslim country, Chowdhury has access to Hasina that her male colleagues lack. During the February Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) mutiny (REFTEL A), Hasina entrusted Chowdhury to negotiate with the mutineers to secure the release of families confined to their homes on the BDR compound. Hasina probably relies on Chowdhury for advice on matters related to her portfolio and women,s issues.

16. (C) A trusted adviser, H.T. Imam rose to prominence when Hasina appointed him co-chair of the Awami League,s election steering committee. His recent appointment as Adviser to the Prime Minister was seen as a reward for his key role in helping the party prepare for the 2008 elections. Imam's family's loyalty to the Awami League contributes to Hasina's trust; his son,s friendship with former DGFI Director General Golam Mohammad provided a link to the military during the state of emergency. His nephew is a USAID Foreign Service Officer. Hasina has recently charged Imam with leading a special cell to address Bangladesh,s energy problems and implement development projects. A former senior civil servant, Imam advises Hasina on nominations to civilian government posts, according to a US military official. Imam has a reputation for being corrupt.

17. (C) Hasina,s nomination of Zillur Rahman for the Presidency was likely in deference to the octogenarian,s years of party service and his relationship with Hasina,s father, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, whom he served as Awami League Secretary General. Rahman faithfully served as the Awami League President after Hasina,s July 2007 arrest. His wife, Ivy Rahman, who was President of the AL Women,s Wing and Secretary of Women,s Affairs for the Awami League, was killed in a grenade attack targeted against Hasina at an Awami League rally in 2004. Rahman has a close relationship

with Hasina,s family and his wife's nephew is married to Rehana.

¶8. (C) Gowher Rizvi is a longtime confidante of both Hasina and Rehana. He has also been a mentor to Joy. Before taking up his current position as Vice Provost for International Programs at the University of Virginia, Rizvi was head of the Ash Institute at Harvard,s Kennedy School of Government (KSG). He was instrumental in gaining admission for Joy at the KSG. (Joy recently graduated with a master,s degree in Public Policy.) Gowher also arranged for Army Chief of Staff General Moeen Uddin Ahmed to address students at Harvard in the fall of 2007. During that visit, Moeen met with Joy, beginning the discussions that eventually led to Hasina,s release. Rizvi was present when Caretaker Advisers Ghulam Quader and Hossain Zillur Rahman met with Hasina and Rehana in Washington during the summer of 2008 as the negotiations entered their final phase. He continues to advise Hasina on security issues and is particularly involved in Indo-Bangladesh issues. Rizvi formerly served as the Ford Foundation representative in India and has longstanding ties with Indian government officials.

THE AWAMI LEAGUE,S RISING STARS

¶9. (C) Dipu Moni, a first-time minister, and the first female Foreign Minister, is a rising leader in the Awami League. Chosen for the post for her loyalty, extensive qualifications, and relative youth, her selection demonstrated Hasina's commitment to reforming the Awami League. Moni is a physician, lawyer, and public servant, and has party credentials as daughter of a founding member of the Awami League. Moni is on the foreign affairs sub-committee of the Awami League. (COMMENT: Hasina relies on her for foreign policy expertise. Because of her freshman status, we expect her influence does not extend beyond her portfolio. END COMMENT).

¶10. (C) Sohel Taj, State Minister for Home Affairs, is 39 years old. He represents Hasina,s campaign vision of "change" but also has strong connections to Hasina,s family. Taj is close to Hasina,s son, Joy. Taj's late father, Tajuddin Ahmed, was Bangladesh,s first Prime Minister and

DHAKA 00000205 003 OF 003

one of four leaders killed in the 1975 "jail killings." Taj,s mother, Zohra Tajuddin, is a member of the Awami League Presidium. Hasina entrusts Taj to attend high-level meetings where few other government officials are present. While Taj has limited GOB experience, he has the potential to become a party leader. Based on indications thus far, Hasina depends on him to handle day-to-day issues at the Home Ministry. His reach may be broader because the Home Minister is not very conversant in the substance of the Ministry.

SNUBBING THE DISLOYAL

¶11. (C) Hasina has sidelined party leaders and Presidium members not steadfastly loyal to her throughout her recent incarceration. When Hasina was in prison, senior Awami League leaders Amir Hossain Amu, Abdur Razzak, Tofail Ahmed, and Suranjit Sengupta attempted to gain control of the party and force Hasina to step down as party leader. While they remain members of the Presidium, they no longer represent a political threat. Hasina has also neutralized Saber Hossain Chowdhury, former political secretary, and former Awami League Publicity Secretary Asaduzzaman Noor. Both senior leaders were once very close to Hasina but they consorted with DGFI during the state of emergency. It appears they have been cut off from access to Hasina and have been relegated to seats on the opposition,s side of Parliament.

COMMENT

¶12. (C) Hasina's choice of advisers illustrates that personal loyalty is of utmost importance to the Prime Minister, even outranking experience. As the newly formed government faces its early challenges, loyalty to Hasina might not be sufficient for these officials to realize her vision for Bangladesh. As new ministers and advisers learn the ropes, the government will also need to put in place decision making structures. While she was elected with a landslide, Hasina's ability to repeat her victory in five years will depend on the government's performance.
MORIARTY